

Note on Methodology

121 The methods of ethnography, which constitute the basic method
123 used in gathering the data for this report, had to be followed with
considerable discretion, while in Ethiopia. Care had to be taken to
avoid misunderstandings and loss of confidence among the inhabitants
who view study by outsiders with misgivings.

122 Careful preparation by the author included brief but intensive
study of the Amharic language, including writing and grammar; letters
of introduction from a scholar who has the confidence of the emperor;
lengthy procedures in governmental offices in Addis Ababa to obtain
permission and passes to travel to the hinterland where the old culture
is little changed by modern contacts.

121 In planning the field project under such circumstances, the author
deemed it advisable to formulate his objectives in general rather than
specific terms; to assume a flexible and patient attitude; to do what
was possible; to establish a base-line of ethnographic information and
initial analysis.

122 Procedures in the field included travel by mule to various rural
hamlets. This was necessary due to regional differences in culture
traits, notably in the ethnic division of labor. Travel is possible
only in the dry season, October to mid-June. A guide-interpreter was
123 secured in the town of Gondar, where English is taught in the new
124 elementary school. His services became increasingly valuable in inter-
viewing, checking observations and information for reliability and
validity; and, by no means least, in establishing rapport with people
in the region, most of whom knew his father well. For the guide's
father was the local "woggasha" (native surgeon-herbologist-empiricist).

Finally, the author checked his own results against the work of

x 794 their annual convention, ("amat bal", lit. the annual event). This is
756 about the time when the rest of the Christian world celebrates its
796 mardi Gras, Carnevale, Fasching. The timing of the convention is
probably no accident, for there be, as, the day after the noisy
Convention, the period of "kudadē" (lit. suffering) in the life of
Christ, priests would hardly permit the noisy and gay celebration during
lent.

The convention takes place in Addis Alām (lit. new world), the
oldest section of Gondar town, once restricted to Muslims and other
non-Copts.

Unlike Western Conventions of doctors and scientists, the zar
Convention does not consist of calm, objective, sometimes monotonous
and even icy presentations. Instead, in the convention of "zar" doctors
new techniques are subjectively demonstrated on participant zar
devotees who are chronically possessed; diagnostic aids are utilized in
actual treatment of actual patients; new poetry to cajole specific
spirits is recited in ecstatic chants to the beat of the drum, while
the audience joins in with refrain-chanting and rhythmic handclapping.
It is a super - "wādāja" (lit. love-feast) of the zar cult, bigger and
better than ordinary zar cult activities, and introducing new
experience, but in principle follows the same basic procedures of
luring protective zars into public "possession" of the afflicted,
and enlisting them in the diagnosis and treatment of ailments caused
by evil or mischievous zar spirits.

x 794 In view of the esoteric elements in the zar cult, it is little
756 wonder that the "amat bal" is restricted to zar doctors and permanent
123 devotees. Therefore it was not easy for a "European" observer like the
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X794 present author to be permitted to attend this all-night session.

756 Careful negotiations through a trusted intermediary person had to be
•123 arranged ahead of time. For at any time the chief of the zar doctors
796 could end the negotiations on the ground that some of the "zar" spirits would be offended or repelled, and refuse to come into full possession of their "horses" in the presence of a stranger. An additional antagonistic element was fear of the local police detectives, who, though they do not interfere with the zar cult, have orders from the self-conscious central government not to let foreigners witness it.

X794 The chief zar doctor of Gondar in the present generation is the
756 Lady (woyāro?) Salāntew. She is renowned even outside the entire province (Begemdir-Semyen), as far as Tigre province and even in Addis Ababa. This is perhaps more due to her position than her own initiative, for Gondar has long been considered the city of powerful spirits and traditions. She leaves most healing activities to her disciple "balā zar", except for very stubborn cases. More often she is busy as "consultant", for many clients, even non-devotees of the zar cult, bring their family or business, or litigation problems to her. She herself is possessed by several powerful, protective male zars, to whom she ascribes her various powers, from whom she receives inspiration, the spirit of enterprise, courage to experiment in perfect comfort and security without the fear of the evil eye which hampers other individuals engaging in anything new.

She is not afraid of the pinpricks of medium and minor "zar" spirits; for her whole life is devoted to the service of the most powerful ones. One of the latter has strong Coptic Christian affiliations and learning, and guides her in her cautious and unofficial

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756 relations with the priests of the Abyssinian Coptic church; e.g. by whispering to her when to give them private feasts, and how to guide observant Amhara clients - married couples in domestic strife - so as not to come into conflict with the "mäfäs gubä" (lit. soul father, confessor, who would normally arbitrate such a case for the church).

Another of her powerful zars teaches her medicine, and specializes in the diagnosis of difficult cases of possession. Still another is a specialist on what the other zars prefer as sacrifices, taboos, poetry, and how to negotiate with each of them; (i.e. he teaches her how to function like a priestess).

Another of her zars specializes in business advice: when to buy and sell what; when and how to invest in caravans, or invest in construction of town houses. Occasionally she also takes incidental advice from low-status spirits such as Shanqit, who gives her moner hints on how to be a good hostess when entertaining a "telleg säw" (great man) who comes to her in secret; and on how to manage her large household.

Lady Säläntu's posture, when not undergoing possession herself, is one of benign self-assurance, not unlike the calm, almost phlegmatic composure of Amhara nobles who act as if everything must come to them. For Lady Salamtew appears sincere and certain of being able to draw on her private reservoir of protective zar spirits almost any night she chooses.

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115 The writer's negotiations with her were conducted through his guide, himself a native of the Addis Alam section of Gondar, and who, though young, occupied some status as "educated" (seven grades of modern elementary school). Moreover, he was not unknown to Lady Salamtew, for his father, a well-known "wogäsha" doctor in Gondar, had often referred

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patients to her when his organic medicines had not helped. It was this guide who hit on the idea of flattering Lady Salāntew by notifying her that the foreigner was sick, suffering from severe headaches, sleeplessness and chronic intestinal cramps - (all common ailments in her practice), and that he would trust only her for treatment. Whether or not Lady Salantew believed this, it indicated to her that the foreigner would fit himself into the framework and procedures of her zar cult, and not become a disturbing element that might "offend" her zar spirits.

The guide had taken the further precaution of negotiating with her through her brothers, who were willing to encourage her to accept, in the hope of gifts and rewards. As a result, Lady Salantew accepted in principle; but in line with the unhurried dignity of her position she had the foreigner informed that he should send the guide again at a later time when she would make known the conditions under which he might attend the "amat bal" convention. In appreciation for having reached this point in the negotiation, the guide left her brothers with some "etan gänzäb" (money for frankincense).

The next step was reached when Lady Salantu expressed the wish to have the foreigner appear before her, some days before the convention, so that she could look him over.

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Her house, a semimodern affair of hard-mud walls, is reached by a steep downhill trail from the Gondar town market. On the lower level (the old section of Gondar called "Addis Alam") many houses and huts are built on the foundations of stone houses destroyed by the dervishes in the late 19th century. This section, once restricted to Muslim and other non-Coptic minorities, is now largely inhabited by Muslim Ethiopian weavers and retail traders, many ex-slaves of Sudanese or part-Shanqalla

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descent, and a few poor Amhara Coptic families, as well as some Amhara who do business there, such as the "wogasha" doctor. Various elements which do not wish to be under too close scrutiny by the church or the police prefer to live in this section. Here the "sar" societies can pound their drums as loudly as the cult requires, for only muffled sounds will rise to the Coptic part of the town.

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After stooping to pass through the somewhat low entrance to the house of Lady Salantu, the visitor finds himself in a room larger than he had anticipated. He is told to remove his shoes, (as if this were a church or mosque). The room is lit by numerous little clay oil lamps even in daytime - a considerable luxury, - for windows have been carefully avoided or boarded up to assure privacy. On the mud-benches around the wall sit a number of women; others sit on mats on the hard-mud floor. An Amhara male visitor in European type suit, who has just consulted the Lady Salantu, leaves hurriedly. Lady Salantu is seated on a raised platform at the far end of the room, behind a curtain, and another area in front of her stage is marked off by a long, thin wooden beam embedded in the floor. The women devotees in the room are busily spinning cotton with their little distaffs, and, since it is still afternoon and not yet "sar time", whisper and gossip with each other freely. Some take time out to suckle their babies, often without rising.

Someone has gone behind the curtain and whispered to her that the foreigner and his guide have arrived. She promptly pulls the curtain aside, but pretends to pay no special attention to the visitor. Her active sars have not possessed her at this time, and she therefore appears absent-minded. She sits on a slightly raised seat on the small

X 794 stage, her legs crossed almost Turkish fashion, very unlike the usual
756 Amhara posture. She is in her late forties, a rather stocky, powerful
123 woman. Her features are heavy, and she seems at least half-Sudanese.
She reinforces the non-Amhara, alien aspects of her appearance by wearing
large, yellow, metal bracelets and anklets, and a Muslim-type deep red
print cloth over her hair and shoulders. The dirt floor of her platform
is covered with sheepskins. Whoever rises is careful not to turn her
back to Lady Salantu. Whenever she moves, there is an attentive hush
in the whisperings. In the far corner the smoke of incense rises
slightly and blends with the light smoke of the oil lamps.

The only males in the room are the two brothers of Lady Salantu,
and it is with them that the guide begins his whispered negotiations.
The visit is brief. Before leaving, the guide advises the foreigner
to leave Lady Salantu some "frankincense money." The foreigner under-
stands that he is to give it to her directly - which is a faux pas -
and crosses over the separating beam to place the money in her hand.
Only after several days does he learn that this was a breach of protocol,
for by touching her hand he might have removed one of her valuable sars
"by contagion".

Some days later the negotiators make known their conditions for
permitting the foreigner to witness the "amat bal" annual convention.
He is to send three dollars worth of imported incense including
frankincense, sandalwood, also sesame seeds; one dollar's worth of coffee
beans; a small amount of gunpowder which is pleasing to one of her sars;
one bottle of "araq" (arrak) distilled liquor. The foreigner is for-
bidden to take any written notes (which a foreign missionary had once
done) on the grounds that this is displeasing to the sar. He is warned

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123 not to cross the boundary in front of the stage again. He is not to approach the house until well after nightfall, and is to come by a back trail, so as not to be seen by passersby.

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123 Thus, after nightfall on the 23rd of the month of Yekatit, he climbed over eroded back trails down to the "Kokit" section of Addis Ababa and approached the house of Lady Salāmtu where her devotees were assembled. It was 7:30 P.M. More oil lamps had been lit. There were about 20 women, but a male sar doctor with talents in poetry and chanting sat near the stage, wearing a white turban much like a Coptic Abyssinian priest. A powerful male drummer had been hired for the occasion.

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123 Lady Salāmtu still took no official notice of the foreigner, for her sar had not yet "descended", and without that she was just a hollow shell, a mute "horse". One of her brothers motioned the foreigner politely to a seat on the mudbench that ringed the wall. There was much subdued whispering, as if a momentous event was about to take place. The hairdo of several of the women devotees and doctors had been specially arranged to honor their individual sars: those not permitted to cut their hair had plaited it into a braid ("surosh") surrounding the skull; others had shaved a circle in the middle (called "gucho"), like a little girl.

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778 Other preparations and paraphernalia included the ritual coffee trays ("gānda"), which symbolized the wooden "tabot" (sacred tablet) of the holy Coptic city of Aksum, and which were dedicated to several sars including Sāyfu Chāngār and Rahēlo. The ancient mother of many sars, named "Gerar" was believed to have stolen the original "tabot"

X 794 of Lady Salantew's body. The twisting began like an embrace, with her
796 head thrown back, rotating movements of the chest, followed by a
756 rhythmic forward bump of belly and hips. Her ecstatic shrieks varied
781 from pain to exultation (like the "allel" of women in the Coptic church service). Encouraging shouts came from individual women in the audience, and some raised their hands - reddened palms in prayerful joy. As the climax approached, the jerky twisting of Lady Salantew's body gradually changed to smoother movements of the limbs. She was now well in tune with her zar, and he was comfortable within her. The excitement in the audience changed to warm and glowing emotion at the same time. Then Lady Salantew emitted a loud scream, and dropped in a heap. The drum stopped abruptly. There was a sudden hush in the audience. The strong sweet odor of generously burned incense pervaded the consciousness and its smoke leisurely curled upward.

X 794 It was only a matter of minutes before Lady Salantew recovered.
756 Her brother pulled the curtain to one side. Her eyes were bright with
796 curiosity as she glanced about the house as if she had just arrived. She had lost her absent-minded appearance, for now the zar acted and spoke through her. Suddenly she appeared to notice the foreigner for the first time, smiled and waved a friendly greeting. Her voice was still husky, but warm, as she called out "how are you" in understandable Amharic, rather than her esoteric "zar language"; this was a courtesy, though
[95] she used the female familiar gender (the zar often uses the inverted genders in address). She further inquired whether the foreigner was sitting in comfort, and how his health was today (hinting at the "ailments" he had used as a pretext). Then she ordered the handmaids to offer the foreigner tälla (barley beer), and coffee, on one of the zar coffee trays.

⁷⁹⁴ realizing that her "zar" had insulted the powerful one of Salantew.
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[688] Back on her throne, Lady Salantew harshly admonishes the audience for
dosing, for whispering, for laughing, and some for having taken food
and drink during the previous "gurri". This inattentiveness is an in-
sult to her zar, and she threatens to recess the convention if it
continues. But then she sugarcoats the threat by calling for another
round of refreshments.

[853] Some of the babies in the rear had cried, and were nursed by
their mothers. This had also been done by some of the possessed
women previously, sometimes within half an hour after the exhausting
"gurri". Motherhood and zar devotion evidently did not conflict.

• [123] Lady Salantu used this intermission to send the foreigner word
promising "I shall appoint you a zar as your weqabi (protective
spirit)". When she saw that he had drunk some of the barley beer
which she had ordered to be served on the tablet of her zar. This
time she addressed him in the female gender again, just as she had
used a male gender in addressing her female devotees. The zars
are believed to enjoy playing their game of turning nature upside
down.

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⁷⁹⁶ About 1A.M., everyone rose, except the poet and the drummer.
Fresh incense was heaped on the burners. Tired and partly intoxi-
cated members of the audience were shaken awake. For now they
were to witness the "fukkara", the individualistic "boasting dance"
of Lady Salantew's zar. It was a spastic bobbing up-and-down dance,
similar to the "hotu" dance of warriors. The drum beat faster and
[293] faster, Lady Salantew seemed to forget her dignity, but still waved
her strap, the symbol of her seniority, while the devotees shouted

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*121	<i>arām</i>	"indolent" (literally, "full of feces")
181	<i>ya-dehā ḥijj</i>	"son of a poor man"
571	<i>ya-lēbā ḥijj</i>	"son of a thief"
578	<i>yas abāṭṭ</i>	"bastard" (literally, "where is your father?")
[673]	<i>waslātā</i>	"lazy no-good"

Other, less direct forms of insult are also widely employed. As was already mentioned, a major use of the wax-and-gold formula is to express insults in so veiled a manner that direct reprisal is unlikely. Another tactic is that of not showing someone the proper respect or in some way manipulating the forms of etiquette to his disadvantage. A favorite anecdote concerning Alaqā Gabra Hännā illustrates the simultaneous use of both methods: the Alaqā once flattered a donkey driver by bowing quite low to greet him and calling, *Endēt adarātchu?* ("How did you spend the night?"). Only when the man proudly related the episode to his friends, so the story goes, was he made to realize that the greeting was expressed in the plural form (*-atchu*), implying that he and his donkey were being placed in the same category.¹⁸ Still another mode of indirect insult is that known as *ashmur*, in which two friends insult each other vigorously at the top of their voices, the real object of their abuse being a third party who is within earshot.

If the Amhara is by disposition inclined to bestow insults, he is still readier to take offense at the slightest hint of one directed at him. One of the tasks of socialization among the Amhara is to sensitize the young person to the various types of insults and to motivate him to strike back when he is so offended. Insults are frequently part of a vicious circle which moves from petty disagreement to serious argument to litigation at court, *dulā* fights, and even premeditated murder. Breach of etiquette may lead to no less serious consequences. In one court case which the author observed, a man was accused and convicted for addressing his father-in-law, whom he normally addressed by the polite form *ersewo*, with the familiar form *anta* in a moment of anger.

Argumentation, litigation, insulting, and revenge comprise the hard core of social interaction among Amhara. While it is possible to exaggerate the significance of these forms in the total pattern of Amhara social life, there can be little doubt of a strongly dissentious disposition just below the surface, and often at the surface, of Amhara interpersonal relations. Still another axis along which this individualistic disposition tends to be manifest is that of deception and suspicion.

*121 The Amhara is a master at *deception*. With straight face and convincing
181 manner he will relate the most preposterous fictions. The Amhara themselves
571 tend to be aware that this is one of their characteristic activities. When, for
577 example, I replied to the query of an Amhara gentleman that some horn
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goblets (which I had purchased for one dollar) had cost five dollars each, he remarked: "Ah, I see you have learned this country's art of lying well."

The phenomenon in question is not an unmixed expression of egoism. At times the Amhara employ deception chiefly for reasons of considerateness, not wanting to tell the other person something that will offend him. Thus a person will agree to honor a request made by his neighbor even though he has no intention in the world of doing so; his neighbor probably understands this but still prefers an insincere "Yes" to an out-and-out "No."

Most of the time, however, deception is obviously being used to further one man's interests at the expense of another's. A person seeking a favor will pretend to be in much poorer straits than he actually is.* A needy traveler may pretend to be an important personage or otherwise disguise his identity in order to secure lodging for the night. An artisan, in order to obtain business, will tell his prospective customer that a certain job will be finished in two days when he has no intention of completing the work within a fortnight. To refer once again to my own experience: when I once needed to rent a mule for a week, and it was felt that the local mule owners might be reluctant to rent one for more than two or three days, I was advised by some respected Amhara men in the area that the only thing to do was to say that the mule was wanted for a few days, then on return to say that unexpected factors prevented my getting back on time. Far more imaginative plays of deception are attributed, again, to Alaqa Gabra Hännä, who is renowned for the episode of sending word to Menelik that he was dead so that the Emperor would send money on his behalf to Gondar.

Like the indirect forms of insulting, deception has its more subtle, passive forms; deceptiveness by omitting the truth rather than committing a falsehood. One might render the basic principle that informs communication among the Amhara as: *Avoid binding commitments; maximize the degrees of freedom left after any utterance.* Questions and answers are typically couched in extremely oblique language. Unless there is some overwhelming personal advantage to be obtained from providing information, the Amhara tend to give answers—when they do not pretend not to understand the question—in terms so ambiguous as to be worthless; for example, replying to a question about the location of a certain place or person with the word *mādo* ("yonder").

The natural complement of so much deception is pronounced *suspiciousness*. Amhara are constantly on the lookout for latent meanings and hidden motives.

* One Amhara priest, for example, showed me that he had no clothes other than his single blanket in order to gain sympathy and induce me to give him something. But when he learned I had a camera, he went home promptly to get dressed for a photograph.

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